

UNIVERSAL

presents

FLASH GORDON

ALEX RAYMOND'S CARTOON STRIP

with

BUSTER CRABBE
JEAN ROGERS
PRISCILLA LAWS



Chris Garcia's

DRINK TANK

There seems to be a universal rule around these parts; when things seem to be going well, a computer crashes. CorFlu ended, everything went pretty well, then my computer crashed.

All the art I gathered.

All the issues I'd been working on.

Every back issue of my zines, including the dining guides for various cons.

Gone.

All gone.

Everything, gone.

Not even recoverable on the drive for some reason. Something truly terrible happened that must have blanked everything off the drive. I mean NOTHING is left. When I had it read, it was blank. Not there were significant sectors gone or corrupted, but there was nothin' there! I mean nothin'. It sucks.

So, this one has been delayed twice, first by prep for CorFlu, which went really well and I had such a blast that you can read about in the up-coming issue of Claims Department, and then by the crash.

Is sorrow.

OK, this issue is the Flash Gordon issue. I just got another article from Taral that I'll run next week, after I've hopefully put together some more art and the like, and that'll be another article in the 52 Weeks project. Which one? Well, you'll figure it out shortly.

That's a cover by Mo Starkey, by the way. She did most of the Art gathering for this one! I love it when Mo does the covers. She's a great one, she is.

And I'll probably be over CorFlu in the next month. I'm still pooped.





52 Weeks To Science Fiction Film Literacy Flash Gordon (1936)

Every genre has characters that are so tied to it that they are a part of the entire fabric of the genre. In Detective fiction, it's Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot (OK, there are a bunch of others as well). In science fiction, perhaps more than any other character set, it's Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. Yes, there were characters like John Carter of Mars, but those two were the explosive characters that caught on huge. Buck Rogers appeared in the late 1920s and was a huge hit, initially as stories and later as a comic strip. Buck Rogers would eventually include a film serial, novels, a television series and more.

Flash Gordon, it would seem, was

a bit bigger.

As sometimes happens, Flash Gordon came along after, but was a bigger hit. While you'd hear SF described as 'that crazy Buck Rogers stuff', Flash Gordon, inspired by and created to compete with Buck Rogers, was a bigger hit and quickly moved beyond comic strips and stories onto the big screen. It wasn't in feature films that Flash made his hit, or at least not initially, but as a series of serials.

The first serialized media appearance of Flash Gordon was on Radio in 1935. It was a popular show, not one of the huge hits of the time, but big enough that it was well-remembered even a de-

cade later. The first followed the comic strip pretty close, though it would eventually slide more and more on its own.

It was in 1936 that Flash Gordon reached immortality on film.

Film serials were an important part of films ever since *The Perils of Pauline* in 1914, really established the serial as an attraction. It wasn't the first, but it was the first big splash. By the 1930s, sound serials from companies like Universal, Republic and Columbia were huge into the serial world and you'd get a short subject, a serial episode and a feature or two in the old days. Many of the biggest characters in film were out of the world of serials.



Flash Gordon's first serial appearance was in 1936, less than two years after his first appearance in the funny pages. Universal had secured the rights to Flash and put it into a 13-chapter serial. The star, Buster Crabbe, was an Olympic Gold Medalist swimmer and a huge college sports star at UCLA. He had played Tarzan in 1934 and was in the midst of a major film career. Serials, with rare exceptions, were the turf of lesser stars, and Crabbe was one of the bigger names doing serials. His performance as Flash

was swashbuckling and strong, though he wasn't one of the great actors at the time. In fact, he would become a pretty darn good actor in the 1960s when he was doing a lot of television.

The serial itself was a massive hit. It was probably the most memorable of all the SF serials, and led to several sequels and continuation serials. Flash wasn't the first SF serial, but it was the most famous and led to an explosion of SF serials coming out, including a Buck Rogers serial which really was a lot of fun. The Undersea Kingdom, The Phantom Creeps, The Adventures of Captain Marvel and Dick Tracy all came closely on the heels of Flash Gordon and his sequels. It was a big push and one of the reasons that B-Movies hit so big in the 1950s was that the serials had been such a big hit, and as they were falling away, they moved into lower-budget features.

The serial was 13 episodes and it goes over the early adventures from the strip where Dr. Zarkov flies a ship to Planet Mongo, which is on a collision course with Earth. Along with Zarkov are Flash, a champion polo player, and Dale Arden, a lovely young woman who the ruler of Mongo, Ming the Merciless, lusts over. They went with the traditional Cliffhanger model where you'd end every episode with the heroes in peril. When you run a different episode every week, you had to do stuff like that to keep people coming in for the shows.

To me, it's all about Ming. The

guy's performance was highly influential on almost every villainous science fiction performance of the next 70 years. Merciless? Yes. Well made and acted like a mad man. It was like John Malkovich studied every move Ming made and based his acting style on it!

The fifth episode is often noted for a scene where King Vultan of the Hawkmen, corners Dale. It was noted as the most erotic thing that had been allowed on screen since the Hayes Code came into effect. It's mild by today's standards, or even the standards of the early 1960s, but then it would have been mind-bottling... like one's mind was placed inside a bottle! As it was a Universal produc-



tion, and since Serials were, in many ways, like the younger brother getting the hand-me-downs, there are a lot of pieces from other Universal feature films, most notably the Rocket Ships from the musical Just Imagine, and there's a dance sequence they lifted straight from the silent picture The Midnight Sun. I immediately recognized the pieces from Just Imagine, but I've never managed to see The Midnight Sun.

While there was recycling, what's amazing is that the images from the picture were completely influenced by the work of science fiction artists, especially Frank R. Paul. If you watch it, and then take a look at early Amazing covers,

you'll be shocked how clearly the images were listed.

How important was Flash Gordon? Well, not the first Science Fiction serial, but certainly the biggest splash and the one that had the most SF elements. It was a huge step forward for the state of science fiction film. It led to two sequels at a number of rip-offs, then to a couple of different television series (including one recent one which was horrible) and feature films. The first follow-on features were just re-cut versions of the serials, a typical practice, and there are several different versions. More than one of these is currently available on DVD, and I believe that they are releasing a fully-

restored version of the complete serial.

Flash Gordon was put on the National Film Registry in 1996, sixty years after its initial release. That's a good sign that it's of the highest importance to the history of film. To the history of science fiction film, it fills the role of being one of the most significant of all science fiction films financially, in being the real jump-starter for a blitz of SF in film, especially serials, and it helped establish all of the traditions we have for space films. Watching it, you can see the threads that led to future films like The Angry Red Planet, Forbidden Planet and even in Ed Wood's stuff. It's one of the most important films in the 1930s.





Creatures From A Thousand Worlds by Frank Wu

I have a Ph.D. and a well-paying job because of “Flash Gordon.”

People at science fiction conventions still seem surprised when I tell them that I have a Ph.D. in bacterial genetics. Maybe they think of me as just an artist. But if you’re going to do science fiction art, it’s good to know some science. My day job is writing patents for cancer treatments (if you invent a cancer cure, I can help you get a patent on it!). This job finances the trips to cons, plus the Guidolon project and Brianna’s “Revolution 60” videogame.

But how did I get interested in science, specifically biology?

Shows like “Star Trek” and “Flash Gordon”! When I was little, I wanted to be like Spock, knowing everything about everything. (I tried, but didn’t quite succeed, as evidenced by Bri beating me at three games of “You Don’t Know Jack” the other night.)

When I was in high school, I finally got to see the original Buster Crabbe “Flash Gordon” serials. They were being

rerun once a week, Friday nights at 7 pm on the local PBS station. My super-strict Chinese parents allowed me to be excused from dinner – which was always 7 to 7:30, exactly coinciding with CBS Evening News, first with Walter Cronkite, then with Dan Rather. But I was excused to take my dinner alone into the dark, cold basement and watch the flickering old black and white “Flash Gordon” images on a flickering old black and white TV set.

I was spell-bound.

I always preferred the original “Flash Gordon” serial to the later two (wherein he went to Mars and later conquered the universe) or the Buck Rogers serial.

Why?

One of the same reasons I love “Star Trek”: the biological diversity.

In the first serial, we see all manner of human variants – Lion Men. Shark Men. Monkey Men. Tree Men. And most awesome of all, Hawkmen, with their expansive wings and winged helmets that

inspired the later Hawkman comic character.

Even better than the guys with fake beards were the fake-looking monsters!

Moments after landing on planet Mongo, Flash is harassed by a slurpasaurus! A slurpasaurus, for those who don’t know, is a real lizard – an iguana or monitor – with rubber horns glued onto it. A cheap, easy and cheap-looking way to make monsters, rather than the time-consuming and difficult technique of stop-motion animation. Slurpasaurus show up in the 1929 version of “Mysterious Island” and later in the 1940 “One Million B.C.”, the 1959 “Journey to the Center of the Earth” and the 1961 “The Lost World.” That slurpasaur taught me the most important lesson about monster design: Everything looks cooler with more horns than strictly necessary, which explains the excessive plumage on Guidolon’s head.

Later on, Flash is menaced by the horrific and gigantic Gocko! This is a

man in a dragon suit, with lobster claws for hands. Now, of course, a Gocko is improbable – because lobsters come from one phylum (Arthropoda) and both men and dragons come from another (Chordata). These are creatures so different that one has the skeleton on the outside and the others have the skeleton inside. You have to wonder how the transitional joints work, but it's a wonderful biological experiment.

Flash also battles the horrifying Octosac (the giant killer octopus). It's the most impressive cinematic battle between man and limp rubber ceph-

alopod ever – until Martin Landau flails against his rubber octopus in “Ed Wood”.

Flash also duels an orangopoid (a gorilla with a horn on its head). It is, again, the most exciting battle between a man and a gorilla suit with a horn on its head ever filmed – until Kirk fights the Mugato.

Besides these horrors, there are these marvels:

The Devourosaurus: A giant dragon-headed snake-like fish thing that menaces Flash and his friends underwater!

The Constrictosaurus: A giant python

that Flash battles in his dungeon cell – and strangles with his own chain!

The horrible Squirlons: Rabid flying squirrels that will bite your head off!

The Tsak with two heads!

The Magnoped: The elephant with two trunks!

The Horn-Horse: The horse with a horn on its head!

The Horn-Snake: The snake with a horn on its head!

The Tigron: The tiger with a horn on its head!

Alex Raymond's planet Mongo is like a crazy man's zoo!

How could a fledgling biologist not be enchanted and inspired by such bio-diversity?

